

The University of Memphis

STANDARD 1B: PILOT EVALUATIONS OF OTHER GENERAL EDUCATION OUTCOMES MEASURES

National Survey of Student Engagement

Description

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is designed to provide data on how college students evaluate their educational experience, including how they spend their time, the types of assignments they complete, and the nature and quality of their interaction with faculty and other students. The NSSE, now in its fifth year, is co-sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning; it is administered by Indiana University. Five clusters of information are provided through the survey: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment.

Of the 79 questions on the NSSE, excluding the 15 demographic questions, approximately 24 are related to outcomes considered important to general education. For example, the survey asks students about their experiences with class presentations, writing drafts for papers, writing papers that integrate ideas from various sources, how coursework has emphasized various mental activities (memory vs. analysis, synthesis, judgment, and application), and personal development (learning effectively on one's own, thinking critically, understanding self).

The NSSE can be administered as either a paper survey or as a Web survey. For the paper survey, students receive a letter inviting them to participate, a hard copy of the survey, and the option of completing a Web version of the survey. Alternately, for the Web-only survey, students receive an informational letter by US Mail, and then all other correspondence and the survey are sent by e-mail.

Rational

The NSSE survey is founded 25 years of research into educational practices that are effective in helping students learn. The survey is designed to collect evidence of the extent to which students are engaged in such practices. Currently, exit testing for general education provides results in specific skill and knowledge areas (English, Math, Science, Social Studies, Critical Thinking), but little is known about what students actually do in the classroom or the extent of their involvement in the learning process. The NSSE provides information about the emphasis of classes on higher order thinking skills, the challenge level of examinations, the extent of reading assignments and papers written, and the number of hours spent on homework or preparation for classes. Information gained from the survey is compared to national norms and peer groups. Random sampling ensures that the results are comparable, meaningful, and credible.

Replicability

The pilot is easily replicated at other colleges and universities because the research design is standardized by NSSE.

Relevance to SACS

SACS standards require that an “institution identifies expected outcomes for its education programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results.” NSSE describes the survey as measuring “the extent to which students participate in activities that matter to their education, something that accreditors and other external groups want to know.” NSSE results can provide a college or university with data to identify weak and strong areas in the institution’s learning environment and, when used over time, will assist in documenting improvements.

Sampling Plan

The survey is administered each spring to a random group of students selected by NSSE. We provided a student data file of freshmen and seniors and prepared copy for an invitation letter and follow-up letters. NSSE handled the selection of the random sample, mailing the invitation letter, e-mailing students with the survey, follow-ups with non-respondents, data collection, and analysis. Essentially, NSSE did all the work.

The sample size is standardized by NSSE based on the size of the undergraduate population and the type of survey, paper or Web. For UofM, the sample size drawn was 1400 students.

Costs

Institutional fee	\$300
Sampling fee	\$4200 (for a range of 4000 – 15,000 undergraduate students)
UofM Total	\$4500

(The fees have increased \$700 for the 2004 administration of the NSSE.)

Results

The results will not be available from NSSE until the fall semester and will be included in the 2003 - 04 Performance Funding Report.

Discussion

The NSSE survey is extremely easy to administer. Most of the hard work for this type of project is handled at Indiana University and the Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning – planning, design, printing, selection of the sample, mailings, data analysis, and reporting. In November 2002 we provided NSSE a data file of enrolled freshmen and seniors at UofM. We also sent printed stationery for the initial mailing and copy for letters from President Raines. At Indiana University the sample for 1400 students was randomly selected from the data file and the letters and e-mail survey were sent during the spring 2003 semester. The staff at Indiana University was professional and courteous and responded quickly to our questions or concerns.

We did experience problems with student participation. About five weeks into the survey we had a 13% response rate, compared with the national average of 24% percentage for the Web version. To increase this rate, we initiated the following steps.

- Developed a new e-mail letter to non-respondents from the president and president-elect of the Student Government Association encouraging student participation.
- Offered those being surveyed a chance to win one of eight \$25 gift certificates to the university bookstore.
- Called all non-respondents to remind them about the survey and its importance to UofM, answered questions, and again reminded them about the chance to win a gift certificates.

In the end, we increased the response rate 8% to 21%, still less than the national average (34%).

For future administrations of the NSSE we would add the following steps to our process:

- Send a general e-mail to all freshmen and seniors advising them of the upcoming survey and the chance to win a prize if they complete the survey.
- Increase the number of prizes from eight to ten, with one \$100 gift certificate, a \$50 gift certificate, and six \$25 certificates.
- Have the university call center call the students in the sample on the first day the survey is sent, and begin phone calls to non-respondents three weeks later.